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REPORT ON VISIT TO KAMPUCHEA

EDITORS -- In late 1979, a delegation of Church leaders -- including Dr. Marcus Cummings of Cincinnati, an Episcopal layman and then-member of the Executive Council -- spent ten days in Indochina talking to political leaders, relief experts and ordinary citizens in an effort to expand and focus the relief efforts of the Church World Service organization. Reprinted here are excerpts from their report on the portion of their visit spent in Cambodia (Kampuchea) which offer a stark portrait of conditions which Churchpeople are helping to remedy in that country.

Though the visit was quite short, with our own eyes we saw how Phnom Penh is today a city in shambles, with houses and buildings destroyed, and extensive rubble. The central commercial area is gutted. The city is devoid of many of the basic services one expects in any functioning city -- transportation, lighting, garbage collection, etc. The city is depopulated, though no longer quite the ghost city reported a few months ago. People are returning slowly under controlled conditions; life is picking up again. We saw a functioning hospital, a school in operation, some street markets, a government ministry in early stages of reorganization, the presidential palace in quite good repair, university buildings standing though without functioning classes as yet. The central bank is destroyed and there is no usable currency. Some reconstruction is under way, though painfully little. In Siem Reap we saw the ancient temples, largely unkempt and untended, yet fortunately not destroyed. People appeared to be poor, drab and needy. We did not see first-hand the reported famine conditions, but these were admitted freely by the President and the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare.

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We talked with government leaders and private citizens who first and foremost attacked the prior regime of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary for the genocide and senseless murder of Kampuchians in the 1975-1978 period. Reportedly population dropped in that period from some seven million to about four million. A disproportionate number of women are widows. We saw and heard evidence of this brutal regime at many points. We were told there remain in Kampuchea 56 doctors of more than 500 present in the pre-1975 period. Of 2000 Buddhist monks in 1975 only about 750 remain. Many orphans are left in the country, with at least 3000 concentrated in orphanages at present.

Our particular interest was in the food and hunger situations, and it was difficult to ascertain reliable figures and statistics, but the magnitude of the problem is vast. President Heng Samrin spoke of two million persons in conditions of hunger and malnutrition, and the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare confirmed this figure. Rice rations, where available, are minimal. Food production is abysmally low. No one is sure what percentage of the arable land is currently planted, but some estimates go as low as 5% while none surpass 20%. Thus the prospects of rice and other food production are dismal. In such conditions infant mortality appears to be high, though reliable statistics at this point are unavailable. We saw few children under the age of five. The need for basic foodstuffs is massive, as is the need for medicines, mosquito netting, and in time, immunological vaccines.

Factories that process food, such as fish processing plants, are inoperative, with machinery out of repair. Schools are only beginning to function. There are few teachers, and there is a complete dearth of the most basic elements such as paper and supplies. There is a dearth of manpower for reconstruction, and the administrative infrastructure of the nation is extremely fragile, lacking basic necessities throughout.

Our primary contact was with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, which has responsibility for hospitals, clinics, dispensaries and orphanages in all 18 provinces and the country's 1900 villages. The Ministry of Economy, with which we had no contact due to the shortage of time, is responsible for the country's general food distribution program. The Minister of Health and Social Welfare gave us a list of needed supplies and urged they be sent clearly labelled for his Ministry.

Future negotiations are complicated by the fact that only the Ministry of Foreign Affairs can approve the entry or residence of a foreigner. Other ministries appear to be most reluctant to intercede with Foreign Affairs. While in Hanoi we spoke with the Kampuchea Ambassador to Vietnam who told us that he would do all he could to facilitate the entry of CWS representatives to Kampuchea to pursue aid arrangements.

Our interview with President Heng Samrin combined a plea for aid with an expression of the President's intense displeasure with any attempt to provide relief aid of "two faces," namely, to the Phnom Penh government area and to areas still controlled by the Pol Pot forces, which he viewed as abetting the Pol Pot political aims.

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